

DOLL U. M.  
ART IN FICTION













T H E  
I N V I S I B L E  
C O L L E C T I O N



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*The Invisible Collection*





TWO STATIONS beyond Dresden an elderly gentleman entered our compartment, greeted the passengers courteously, sat down opposite me, and nodded to me as if I were an old acquaintance. I did not recognize him at first, but when he mentioned his name with a half-smile I at once recalled him as one of the best-known art-dealers and antiquarians in Berlin, from whom in the days before the war I often bought old books and autographs. We spoke of indifferent matters, until he interrupted the trend of conversation to say: 'I must tell you how I happen to be here. I have just had the rarest adventure that ever befell an old art-peddler like me—the strangest in my thirty-seven years of business.'

This trip is one of those impromptu, new-fashioned business jaunts that are among the few pleasant things this unhappy inflation craze has brought us home-keeping antiquarians.

Probably you don't know what art-dealing is like since the value of money has been vanishing like a flash. The newly rich have just discovered that their





hearts are yearning for Gothic Madonnas and incunabula and old embroideries and pictures. You can't get enough to supply them. I have to fight desperately to keep them from buying me out of house and home—from taking the cuff-links out of my shirt and the lamp off my desk. At the same time we are having a harder and harder time to get any goods to sell. Pardon the word 'goods'; I know it jars upon a man like you, but these fellows use it so much that I have picked it up in spite of myself. In fact, I have come to regard a marvelous Venetian original edition much as I should an overcoat that cost so many dollars, and a sketch by Cuercino as merely the incarnation of a bank note for a few thousand francs.

In casting about for something to sell, it occurred to me to look through my old ledgers and letter books, to see if there were not people among our old customers who would be glad to raise money on some of the things they bought from me in their better years before the war. Such an old customers' list is a sort of mortuary record to-day, and I did not find many addresses that I could use. Most of my former clients had long since auctioned off all they owned or were dead, and I had nothing to hope for from the few who

remained. Just as I was about to give up in despair, I chanced upon a whole file of letters from a gentleman who was perhaps my oldest customer, but whose name had slipped my mind because I had not heard from him since before the war.

This correspondence was a remarkable one. It went back almost sixty years. The writer had bought from my father and my grandfather. Yet I could not recall having seen him in my shop during the thirty-seven years since it was mine. Everything seemed to show that he was one of those odd, old-fashioned eccentrics such as survived here and there in our provincial towns until quite recently. His letters were written like copperplate. Each item in his order was underlined with a ruler and red ink. He always mentioned figures twice, so that there might be no mistake. These peculiarities, as well as the fact that he wrote his notes on torn-out flyleaves and enclosed them in miscellaneous envelopes that he had picked up here and there, stamped him as a punctilious penny-saving provincial. After his signature he always signed in full 'Provincial Forester and Farm Steward, Retired; Lieutenant, Retired; Holder of the Iron Cross First-class.' Since he must be a veteran of the Franco-Prussian War,

he could not be under his middle eighties, if he were still alive.

Nevertheless, this ridiculous, cheese-paring miser showed remarkable shrewdness, knowledge, and taste as a collector of old prints and engravings. When I listed his orders for almost sixty years, beginning with those amounting to a few silver pennies, I discovered that this little provincial had quietly got together, in the days when a dollar would buy a stack of the finest German woodcuts, a collection of etchings and engravings easily outrivaling many of the widely advertised collections of the newly rich. Merely those that he had bought from us during a half-century, for a mark or a few pfennigs apiece, were now of untold value; and I had every reason to assume that he had also purchased at auctions and from other dealers. Since 1914 we had not received a single order from him; but I was familiar enough with what was going on in the art trade to feel sure that such a collection had never been dispersed either by auction or by private sale. I therefore concluded that this remarkable man must still be alive, or else that his collection remained in the hands of his heirs.

The case so interested me that I left the following

day—that is, yesterday evening—directly for his place of residence; one of the scrubbiest little provincial towns in Saxony. When I got off the train at the tiny station and walked up through the principal street it seemed to me utterly incredible that anyone living in its banal little gimcrack cottages, with their chromos and impossible factory-furniture, could possibly own some of the finest of Rembrandt's etchings and Dürer's engravings, and a complete collection of Mantegnas. In fact it was with a feeling of surprise that I learned at the post office that a Provincial Forester and Farm Steward of the name of my former correspondent was still alive and actually residing in the town.

You can well imagine that I sought his lodgings with a violently beating heart. They were not difficult to find. He lived in the second story of one of those plain, cheaply constructed small-town tenements that speculative jerry-builders used to put up back in the sixties of the last century. An honest merchant-tailor occupied the first floor; the card of a post office employee was on the left-hand side in the second story, and on the right side was a white porcelain plate with the name and titles of the Provincial Forester and Farm Steward. A very old white-haired lady wearing a tidy





black cap immediately answered my hesitating knock. I handed her my card and asked if I might see the *Herr Forstrat*. She gazed at me and then at the card with a look of surprise mingled with a certain distrust. Apparently a visit was something of an event in this old-fashioned house and out-of-way corner of the world. But she asked me in a gentle voice to wait, took the card, and went into a room. I first heard a light whispering and then suddenly a stentorian masculine voice saying: 'Ah, Herr R\_\_\_ from Berlin, the great antiquarian. Let him come in, let him come in, I'm delighted to meet him.' Immediately the little old grandmother trotted out and invited me to enter.

I took off my hat and did so. In the middle of the modest room stood a tall, aged, but still vigorous man, with a bushy moustache, wearing a half-military, frogged smoking-jacket, who cordially held out both hands toward me. But in spite of this friendly gesture, and his obviously spontaneous and sincere cordiality, he made no move to meet me. I had to advance, slightly embarrassed, to grasp his hand. As I did so I observed that he held them motionless in front of him, without attempting to clasp mine. The next moment I understood. The old gentleman was blind.

Ever since I was a child I have felt uncomfortable in the presence of blind people. I have always had a vague embarrassed feeling that in some way I had an unfair advantage over them. I was keenly conscious of this sensation as I glanced up at the old gentleman's eyes, which stared straight ahead of him under his bushy white brows. But he did not allow me to think of this more than an instant. As soon as my hand touched his he shook it heartily, and exclaimed, laughing with almost boisterous delight: 'A rare visit! A miracle! That a big gentleman like you from Berlin should drop into our little nest. . . . But a man has to look out when one of you big experts is on his trail. We have a saying here: "Lock your doors and look to your pockets when the gypsies come." Yes, sir! Yes, sir! I can guess already what brought you. Business is bad now in our poor distressed Germany. Nobody wants to buy anything, so you big gentlemen are out canvassing your old customers. But I am afraid you won't have much luck with me. We old pensioners are thankful to have a crust of bread to eat. We can't go on collecting at the present crazy prices. We're out of the game.'

I told him at once that he was mistaken. I had not



come to sell him anything. I merely happened to be in the neighborhood and seized the opportunity to drop in and pay my respects to an old client of our firm and one of the greatest collectors in Germany. When I said 'one of the greatest collectors in Germany' a pleased expression flashed over the old man's face. He still stood stiff and erect in the middle of the room, but his posture instantly betrayed his pride and gratification. He turned to the spot where he thought his wife was as if to say: 'Do you hear that?' Then with a voice trembling with pleasure, and dropping the brusque military tone he had previously used, he said softly, almost tenderly: 'That is really very, very kind of you. But you must not have made your visit here in vain. You shall see something that you won't see every day, even in Berlin—a couple of pieces that cannot be rived in the Albertina or in Paris, God curse her! Yes, sir, when a man has collected for sixty years, things fall into his hands that you do not pick up anywhere in the street. Louise, just give me the key to the cupboard.'

Thereupon something strange happened. The little old lady, who was standing by his side and listening to our conversation with a sympathetic smile, suddenly



raised both hands toward me with an imploring gesture. I didn't understand for a moment. Then, turning to her husband and laying both hands lightly on his shoulders, she said: 'But, Herwarth, you haven't asked the gentleman whether he has time to look at your collection. It is almost dinner-time. After dinner you must rest an hour. The physician insists on that. Isn't it better to show the gentleman all these things after dinner and have him take a cup of coffee with us? At that time Anna Marie will be here. She understands it all so much better and can help you.'

The moment she finished speaking she turned to me and repeated the same imploring gesture, which I now understood. I saw that she wanted me to refuse to look at his things just then, and so I invented an urgent dinner-engagement. It would be a great pleasure and an honor to look over his collection, but I could hardly do so before three o'clock that afternoon. I should be happy to call again at that hour if he would permit me. The old man turned around impatiently, angry as a child deprived of his favorite plaything. 'Of course,' he growled, 'you Berlin gentlemen never have time. But to-day you must take time, for you are not looking at three or four pieces. I have twenty-seven

portfolios, each one for a different artist, and every one is more than half full. Make it three o'clock then, but come promptly or we shall not finish.'

The little old lady accompanied me to the door. I had noticed that she seemed worried and uncomfortable. As she opened the door she said abruptly in a low voice: 'Would you—would you mind speaking to my daughter Anna Marie before you come? It is better in many ways. Of course you dine at the hotel?'

'Certainly, I shall be very happy to do so,' I said.

And in fact an hour later, just as I stepped into the little parlor of the hotel on the market place after a mid-day dinner, an elderly spinster very plainly clad entered the room, apparently looking for somebody. I stepped up to her at once, introduced myself, and said I should be happy to go with her to see the collection. She blushed violently and, with the same confused embarrassment that her mother had shown, begged to say a few words to me first. I could see that she was in great distress. The moment she began to speak her face turned red and her fingers played nervously with a button on her coat. Finally she stammered: 'My mother has sent me to you. She has told me the whole story. We have a great favor to ask. We want to tell

you before you come to father. Father naturally will show you his collection, and the collection—the collection—is no longer complete. A number of pieces, quite a number, are lacking.’ She had to stop for breath. Then, looking up suddenly straight into my eyes, she continued with an effort:—

‘I must tell you the whole thing. You know the times. You will understand. Father became completely blind after the war. Even before that he could not see very well, and the excitement of the war—well, it destroyed his sight completely. In spite of his seventy years, he was determined to go to France. And as soon as he saw that the army was not getting forward as it did in 1870 he was so agitated that his eyes failed him rapidly. In other respects he was still vigorous. Until this happened, he could make long trips—yes, even go hunting. Now he cannot take walks and his only pleasure is his collection. He looks at it every day. That is, of course he doesn’t see it—he doesn’t see anything—but he takes out his portfolios every afternoon so that he can feel the pieces one after another. He knows them by heart. Nothing else interests him; and I have to read all the auction notices in the newspapers to him. The higher the prices go the

happier he is, for—that is the worst of it—father no longer understands what prices mean in these days. He doesn't know that we have lost everything and that his pension would not support us two days of the month. Besides that, my sister's husband fell in the war and left her with four little children. But father knows nothing of our money cares. First we economized, economized more than ever, but that didn't do. Then we began to sell things. Naturally we didn't touch his beloved collection. We sold what jewelry we had. That was not much, for father had spent every penny that he could scrape together for sixty years on his drawings and engravings. One day we had nothing left. We didn't know what to do, and then—and then—mother and I sold one piece. Father would not have allowed it; he didn't know what a pinch we were in. He had no idea how hard it was to get a bit of food. He doesn't know yet that we lost the war and have had to give up Alsace-Lorraine. We don't read such things to him in the newspapers.

'The first piece we sold was a very valuable one, a Rembrandt. The dealer offered us many, many thousand marks, and we hoped they would support us for a year. But you know how money melts away.





We put the entire sum in a bank and in two months it was gone. After that we had to sell another piece, and still another. And the dealer always sent the money so late that it was not worth much when we got it. Then we tried to sell at auction, and we were cheated there in spite of the millions we received. By the time the millions reached us they were already worthless. So gradually the best things in his collection, except a very few, have gone, and we have received for them barely enough to exist on. Father does not know a thing about it.

‘That is why my mother was so frightened when you came. He would have discovered the whole thing, for we have put blank sheets of paper of the same size and practically the same thickness in place of each piece we took out, so he doesn’t notice it when he handles them. He gets the same pleasure from handling them that he formerly got from looking at the originals. There is nobody here in our little village that father ever thought worthy of seeing them. He loves every piece with a fanatical love, and it would break his heart if he knew one of them had been sold. You are the first man during all these years—since the death of the old Director of the Dresden



Print Department, who used to visit us often—to whom he has offered to show his treasures. So I beg you—'

The poor woman hesitated and raised her hands toward me with tear-dimmed eyes. 'I beg you, don't destroy his happiness. Don't destroy our happiness. Don't spoil his last illusion. Help us to make him believe that all the pieces that he thinks he is showing you are really there. He would not survive the shock if he knew the truth. We may have done wrong, but we could not do otherwise. People must live and—well, four fatherless children like my sister's are more important than any prints. And so far he is very happy. He spends three hours each afternoon lingering over his portfolios, talking to the pieces in his collection as if they were human beings. And to-day I think will be the happiest of all. He has been waiting for years to show his pets to someone who could appreciate them as he does. I beg you, do not rob him of that joy.'

She said all this with an agitation, with a depth of emotion, that I cannot convey to you here. I have seen many a shady deal in my business. I have seen many a man swindled most scurvily during the present inflation, and valuable estates go for a crust of bread.

But this was a case that for some reason went straight to my heart. Of course I promised her not to say a word, and to do my best to carry out the deception.

So we went back to her house together. On the way I learned with a shock for what miserably inadequate sums these poor ignorant women had sold the old man's treasures. So I determined to help them the best I could. We went upstairs and had hardly reached the door when I heard the old man's stentorian voice calling: 'Come in, come in.' With the keen ear of the blind he must have recognized our footsteps on the stairs.

'Herwarth could not sleep to-day—he was so impatient to show you his precious pictures,' the old lady said, laughing. A glance at her daughter told her everything was all right. A great heap of portfolios lay in order on the table. As soon as the blind man felt my hand he grasped me by the arm and pulled me down into a chair beside him.

'So now we will begin. We have a great deal to look at, and you gentlemen from Berlin never have much time. The first portfolio is by Master Durer and, as you will soon see for yourself, quite complete. And each one finer than the others! But I must not

talk. You will judge with your own eyes. Look, now!’ He opened the first portfolio—‘The Big Horse.’

With cautious, light-tipped fingers he drew forth, as tenderly as if he were handling the most delicate piece of porcelain, a yellow, blank sheet of paper, and held it up for me to see. As he fixed his sightless eyes upon it, holding it out level in front of him, an expression of ecstatic admiration crossed his face. I was almost startled at what seemed to be a glow of recognition in his eyes.

‘Now,’ he said proudly, ‘did you ever see a finer impression? Note how sharp, how clear, every detail is. I have compared this copy with the one in Dresden and that one looks flat and heavy beside it. And its pedigree! Look there!’ He turned the sheet over and pointed with his finger nail to a place on the back of the blank paper. He did it so convincingly that I involuntarily leaned forward to see. ‘There you have the stamp of the Nagler Collection. Here that of Remy and Esdaille. They never thought—those great predecessors of mine—that this sheet would ever get here in my little room.’

A cold shudder ran down my back as I watched the unsuspecting old man’s rapture over this meaningless scrap of paper. There was something spectral



and weird in the certainty with which his finger nail traced what he saw only in his imagination.

‘Unrivalled!’ I finally managed to stammer. ‘A magnificent copy!’

His face glowed with pride. ‘But that’s nothing,’ he said triumphantly. ‘You must first see the “Melancholy” or the “Passion”—a colored print. I doubt if it has an equal. Look, now.’ Again his fingers tenderly drew out an imaginary print. ‘Just observe the fresh, lifelike, warm tone. There’s something to make Berlin and its dealers and museum professors sit up and take notice.’

And it went on like this, in a pæan of triumph, for two whole hours. I cannot describe what an uncanny feeling it gave me to gaze at these hundred or two hundred pieces of blank paper, to realize what they represented to that old man, and to watch the tragic, unsuspecting assurance with which he pointed out, with infallible certainty as to every minutest detail, the beauties and merits of each piece. Indeed, it was so real to him that I almost caught his own illusion.

Only once did we come close to the verge of a rude awakening. He was showing me what he supposed was a Rembrandt ‘Antiope’—a trial proof that



must have been of inestimable value—and as he dilated on the sharpness of the print, and passed his nervous, sensitive fingers over it, he missed some light, familiar indentation. A shadow flashed across his face and his voice trembled hesitatingly as he said, with an interrogatory accent: ‘It’s—it’s—that’s the “Antiope”?’ But I hurriedly took the piece from his hand and proceeded to describe with well-feigned enthusiasm a dozen familiar points in the actual etching.

His puzzled expression instantly vanished. The more I praised the more radiant he grew, until at last he burst out triumphantly to his wife and daughter: ‘Here’s a man who knows what these things are worth. You have always grumbled and complained because I put my money into this collection. It is true—for sixty years no beer, no wine, no tobacco, no traveling, no theatres, no books, just saving and saving for these “pictures.” But when I am dead and gone you’ll see, you will be rich—richer than anyone in town, as rich as the richest folks in Dresden. Then you can live as you want to, and have a good time. But as long as I’m alive not a thing here shall leave the house. I shall be carried out first. After me my collection.’



As he spoke he placed his hand tenderly over his portfolios as if they were something alive, with a touching—and under the circumstances a tragic—gesture. Since the outbreak of the war I had not seen an expression of such absolute happiness on the face of a German. His wife stood beside him, watching his pleasure with tear-dimmed eyes. But the old man could not have enough of my praise and appreciation. He kept turning the portfolios over again and again, drinking in every word I had to say. I felt relieved of a weight of responsibility when the deceptive portfolios were at length laid to one side and the coffee placed on the table.

Thereupon the old man began to tell me a thousand anecdotes of his purchases. At each good story he would fumble for his portfolios, refusing any assistance, in order to show me once more the particular print in question. When I finally said that I must go he was tremendously put out, as vexed as a naughty child threatened with a whipping. He stamped his feet impatiently and insisted that I had not seen half of what he had. It was with great difficulty that the two ladies could persuade him that he must not keep me longer, or else I should lose my train.



When finally he was reconciled to my going and we said good-bye, his voice suddenly softened to gentleness again. Taking both my hands, he ran his fingers caressingly over them and up my arms with a blind man's eagerness to learn what I was like, and at the same time as if to express affection.

'You have given me a very great pleasure by your visit,' he began with a very little quaver in his voice. 'It has been a real joy to me—at last, at last, *at last* to be able to show my collection to a man who appreciates it. And you shall see that you have not come in vain to visit an old blind man. I promise you here, with my wife as a witness, that I shall put a clause in my will commissioning your old reliable firm to auction my collection.' As he said this the old man laid his hand again caressingly upon his pillaged portfolios. 'Only promise me that they shall have a handsome catalogue. That will be my monument. I do not want any better.'

I looked at his wife and daughter, who were standing side by side, trembling with their common emotion. The solemnity of the occasion impressed us all, as this unsuspecting old gentleman, with such a touching display of feeling, made a last disposition of his dearest treasure.



The ladies accompanied me to the door. They did not venture to speak, because his sharp ears would have caught every word. But tears were flowing down their cheeks. As I stumbled down the stairs, half dazed by it all, I somehow felt ashamed of my profession. Here I had come, a bargain-hunting dealer, hoping to buy cheaply a few valuable prints. But the memory that I took away with me was something infinitely better than those would have been—I had seen once more the light of pure, unalloyed delight and joy in this gloomy, joyless age.

As I reached the street I heard the sound of a window opening above and my name called. The old man had insisted on looking out in the direction he assumed I was going, although he could see nothing with his blind eyes. He leaned out so far that the women had to hold him, and waving his pocket handkerchief he shouted after me 'A pleasant journey!' with the merry, happy voice of a boy. I shall never forget the sight of the white-haired old gentleman's happy face in the window, high above the hastening, harried, careworn crowd below. And I thought how true the old saying is—I believe it is Goethe's—'Collectors are happy creatures.'







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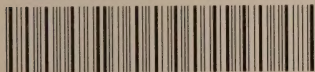








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